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Creating Freedom in the Americas, 1776-1826

Panel II: Comparing independence movements in the Americas

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The Independence of Brazil

This brief paper examines the lengthy and complex process leading to Brazil's independence from Portugal in 1822-5 as part of the general movement in the Americas against European colonial rule in the last quarter of the 18th and the first quarter of the 19th century. In particular, it attempts to explain in broad terms how and why it was a very different process from that leading to the establishment of independent states in Spanish America.

First of all, to what extent did Portuguese America experience, along with the rest of the Atlantic world, the so-called 'crisis of the old colonial system' – economic, political, ideological - of the late 18th century? Were there deep-seated structural factors making the separation of Portuguese America from Portugal, like that of the thirteen colonies of North America from Britain and Spanish America from Spain, pre-determined and therefore inevitable?

At the end of the 18th century, Portugal, a small and underdeveloped metropolis, had become economically dependent on its most important overseas territory, Portuguese America, whose agricultural exports – principally sugar, cotton and, for the first time, coffee – were going through something of a renassaince. And the population of Portuguese America, 2-3 million (not including the indigenous peoples outside Portuguese control), albeit only 30 per cent white, was almost equal to that of Portugal at the time and growing faster. 'So heavy a branch', wrote Robert Southey in his *Journal of a Residence in Portugal 1800-1*, 'cannot long remain upon so rotten a trunk´.

Moreover, there was some sense of a separate American identity among the American-born colonial elite - *senhores de engenho* and other *poderosas da terra* and, to a lesser extent, mine-owners, merchants and bureaucrats. A few had travelled to Europe and had been

influenced by the intellectual climate, the ‘ideas of the century’ – the rights of man, sovereignty of the people, representative government, republicanism - they encountered there. Individual voices could be heard criticizing the mercantilist system and the restrictions it imposed on production and trade (especially the role of Lisbon and Oporto as *entrepôts*) in a period of expanding international markets, the limited availability and high price of imported (mainly British) manufactured goods and, above all, excessive taxation. There were also liberals in Portuguese America prepared to challenge Portuguese absolutism and demand greater participation in government and even political autonomy.

Discontent with the economic and political control exercised from Lisbon should not, however, be exaggerated. ‘Brazilians’ had much closer ties with the metropolis, and much less cause for dissatisfaction, than had the creoles in Spain's American colonies.

In the first place, Portugal was a weak power with limited financial, military - and human – resources and therefore Portuguese colonial rule was by no means as oppressive or as exclusive as Spanish rule; the Brazilian-born were to be found throughout the middle and lower ranks of the imperial bureaucracy. Portuguese settlement of America had been a slow, gradual process (the population of the settled areas as late as 1700 was less than half a million) and although there were, particularly in Bahia and Pernambuco, landed families which could trace their origins back to the *donatários* of the sixteenth century, many prominent landowners were only first generation Brazilians (or even Portuguese-born but already identifying with Brazil). Family and personal ties between members of the Brazilian and Portuguese elites were sustained and reinforced by their common intellectual formation - predominantly at the University of Coimbra. (Unlike Spanish America, Portuguese America had neither universities nor printing presses.)

Secondly, Portugal's reappraisal of its political and economic relations with its colonies and the imperial reorganization – administrative and economic - which occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century under Pombal and his successors was less far-reaching than Spain's under the Bourbons and amounted to less of a direct threat to the colonial status quo and the interests of the colonial elite. Portugal's commercial monopoly was less jealously guarded than Spain's. The British Factories in Lisbon and Oporto supplied the bulk of the manufactured goods exported to Brazil and the British increasingly traded with Brazil directly.

Finally, unlike colonial Spanish America (except Cuba), where native American Indians formed the bulk of the labour force, Brazil was a slave society. Slaves constituted a third or more of the total population. A further 30 per cent was free mulatto or free black. The white minority lived with the fear of social and racial upheaval and was prepared to compromise with the metropolis and accept colonial rule in the interests of social control. Saint Domingue had provided a grim warning to slaveholders throughout the Americas of the consequences of the propagation of ideas of liberty, equality and the rights of man and opposition to metropolitan control in slave societies.

The fact is there were at this time only two significant conspiracies (they hardly had time to develop into rebellions) against Portuguese rule in Brazil - the first in Minas Gerais in 1788-9 and the second in Bahia in 1798.[1] And neither inspired similar movements for political separation from Portugal in other parts of Portuguese America. The leaders of the *Inconfidência mineira*, influenced by the American revolution, dreamed of a 'republic as free and as prosperous as English America'. The leaders of the 'Tailors' Revolt' in Bahia ten years later, more influenced by the French Revolution, wanted political independence from Portugal and republican government but also an end to slavery and racial discrimination. Both conspiracies failed and were met with violent repression - an indication that the Portuguese authorities took them seriously.

Whether or not there was a fundamental, and eventually irreconcilable, conflict of interest between colony and metropolis, which made eventual separation inevitable, there was in Portuguese America no widespread demand for political autonomy, much less independence, at the beginning of the 19th century. And, unlike Spain which was virtually cut off from its colonies in America, Portugal was fortunate in maintaining its neutrality in the European wars and, also unlike Spain, fortunate in the quality of its political leadership. The Portuguese government continued to introduce limited but important measures of economic liberalization and to appoint Brazilians to high positions in both the metropolitan and colonial administrations. They were aware, however, that Portugal's future relations with Brazil were at the mercy of external factors. If Portugal, a close ally of Britain, were to be drawn into its war with France and, in particular, if Napoleon were to invade Portugal, D. Rodrigo de Sousa

[1] Two other conspiracies - in Rio de Janeiro *(*1794*)* and in Pernambuco (1801) - were stifled at birth. João Pinto Furtado, *O manto de Penelope. História, mito e memória da Inconfidência Mineira de 1788-9* (2002) is a recent study of the conspiracy in Minas Gerais.

Coutinho, before his resignation as chief minister at the end of 1803, recommended that, rather than run the risk of losing Brazil, the Prince Regent D. João could and should in the last resort abandon Portugal, move to Brazil and establish 'a great and powerful empire' in South America. Portugal was after all 'neither the best nor the most essential part of the monarchy'.[2]

In November 1807, as part of his attempt to close the one remaining loophole in his Continental Blockade against English trade with Europe, Napoleon invaded Portugal - with repercussions in the New World very different from his invasion of Spain. D. João and the Portuguese court, along with the entire apparatus of the Portuguese state, several thousand members of the Portuguese governing class and several thousand hangers-on, fled to Rio de Janeiro – a unique event in the history of European colonialism. They were escorted by ships of the British navy. Besides treaty obligations going back to the late 14th century, Britain had an interest, both geopolitical and commercial, in encouraging and facilitating the transfer of D. João to America.

In March 1808 the metropolitan government established itself in Rio de Janeiro, which thus became overnight the capital of the Portuguese world-wide empire. And during his brief stay in Bahia in January, D. João had opened Brazil's ports to direct trade with all friendly nations, thus formally ending of the 300-year-old Portuguese monopoly of colonial trade.[3] The relationship between mother country and colony had been decisively altered. Portuguese America was no longer strictly speaking a colony. But neither was it independent and in control of its own destiny. Government remained in hands of D. João, his Portuguese ministers and Portuguese bureaucrats. There had been no collapse of the traditional order, no 'crisis of legitimacy' of the kind that led directly to revolutions for independence throughout Spanish America. The various provinces of the immense territory of Portuguese America were simply governed from Rio de Janeiro instead of from Lisbon.[4]

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[2] Quoted in Kenneth R. Maxwell, *Conflicts and Conspiracies: Brazil and Portugal, 1750-1808* (1973), pp. 233-9

[3] And it was not only foreign, mainly British, merchants who took advantage of the opening of Brazil. Foreign diplomats, naturalists, artists, artisans and assorted travelers also arrived – new people with new ideas – thus ending Brazil's cultural and intellectual isolation. The population of Rio grew from 50,000 to 100,000 in the decade after 1808.

[4] In 1774 the Estado de Grão Pará e Maranhão, a separate state since 1621, had been integrated into an enlarged Estado do Brasil under a single viceroy (whose seat had been transferred in 1763 from Salvador to Rio de Janeiro). In practice, however, the viceroy had only limited powers outside the captaincy-general of Rio de Janeiro and its subordinate captaincies of Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul. The authority of the governors-general and governors of the eight other captaincies-general - Grão Pará and Maranhão (including

With the liberation of Portugal and the end of the war in Europe it was generally expected, not least in London, that the Portuguese Prince Regent would return to Lisbon. But D. João and most of those who had traveled with him, chose to stay in Brazil. And on 16 December 1815 Brazil was raised to the status of kingdom - equal with Portugal. For some historians the creation of the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil and the Algarve, rather than the arrival of the Portuguese court or the opening of the ports in 1808, marks the end of Brazil's colonial status.

The experiment of a Luso-Brazilian dual monarchy with its centre in the New World was, however, doomed to failure. D. João, who became King João VI on the death of his mother in March 1816, governed more with the interests of the Brazilian elite in mind, while at the same time guaranteeing political stability and social order. He was unable, however, to commit himself wholly to Brazil. The Portuguese court and government remained close to the Portuguese mercantile community in Brazil and continued to pursue Portuguese interests. The fundamental conflicts between 'Brazilians' and Portuguese had not been and could not be resolved. Moreover, with the Portuguese government in Rio de Janeiro, metropolitan rule was more immediately felt by Brazilians. Avenues to some limited form of political power sharing had been closed; discrimination in favour of the Portuguese was more pronounced. And the fiscal burden was greater since the Brazilians alone were obliged to support the court and a larger bureaucracy and military establishment, and pay the cost of the Braganzas' dynastic ambitions in the Río de la Plata. The Portuguese government in Rio also sold out vital Brazilian interests by signing treaties with its protector, Britain, for the eventual abolition of the transatlantic slave trade.

Even so, although it undoubtedly existed, Brazilian discontent with the Portuguese regime, now apparently permanently installed in Rio de Janeiro, should not be exaggerated. There was still no strong and certainly no widespread demand for separation from Portugal. There was only one open rebellion and this as much against political - and fiscal - subordination to Rio de Janeiro as against D. João and Portuguese rule as such. In March 1817 a military revolt, which was joined by a landowners facing lower returns from their sugar and cotton exports and higher slave prices, some wealthy merchants, crown judges and priests as well as tenant

Piauí), Pernambuco (including Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte and Paraíba) Bahia (including Sergipe and Espírito Santo), Minas Gerais, São Paulo, Mato Grosso, and Goiás - were for the most part directly responsible to Lisbon.

farmers and artisans, led to the proclamation of an independent republic in Pernambuco. The revolt spread rapidly to Alagoas, Paraíba, Rio Grande do Norte and Ceará. Agents were sent to Europe and the United States to seek international recognition. But then, weakened by internal divisions and facing a naval blockade and military intervention from the south, it faltered. On 20 May 1817 the rebels surrendered. The republic of the North-east had lasted two and a half months. The rest of Brazil had remained quiet. Nevertheless, with the rapid progress of the revolutions for independence in both southern and northern Spanish South America as a warning, the government in Rio showed signs of becoming more repressive.

It was the Portuguese revolutions of 1820, the return of the Portuguese court to Lisbon in 1821 and Portugal's apparent determination to reverse some, perhaps all, of the political and economic concessions made to Brazil since 1808 which led to Brazilian independence. On 24 August 1820 a liberal-nationalist revolt erupted in Oporto, followed by another in Lisbon on 15 October – both a result of deep dissatisfaction with political and economic conditions in post-war Portugal. João VI remained in Rio de Janeiro, insensitive it seemed to the problems of Portugal; the roles of metropolis and colony had been reversed; and Portugal was governed by a Council of Regency presided over by a representative of the British government, Marshal Beresford. At the end of 1820 a *Junta Provisória* was established to govern in the name of the king whose immediate return to Lisbon was demanded. D. João would be expected to adopt the Spanish liberal constitution of 1812 - in force again in Spain after the Revolution of 1820 – pending the formulation of a new Portuguese constitution for which purpose a *Cortes Gerais Extraordinárias e Constituintes*, to include representatives from Portuguese America, would be elected.

In the capital Rio de Janeiro, a *pronunciamento* in February 1821 in support of the revolution in Portugal obliged D. João to approve a future liberal constitution for Portugal and its empire; he also decreed the establishment of governing provincial juntas throughout Portuguese America and the preparation of indirect elections for the Cortes. Serious political conflict arose, however, over the Cortes's demand that the king return to Lisbon. A 'Brazilian' faction or party now emerged to oppose it. Its main elements were big landowners, especially in the captaincies closest to the capital, and Brazilian-born bureaucrats and members of the judiciary. But it included those Portuguese whose roots and interests now lay in Brazil. Nevertheless, D. João finally agreed to return to Lisbon. On 26 April 1821 he set sail, with around 4,000 Portuguese, bringing to an end a thirteen-year residence/exile in Brazil. He left

behind in Rio, however, and this proved significant, his son, the 23-year-old D. Pedro, as Prince Regent.

The 'Brazilians' now had no alternative but to organize themselves for the defence of ‘Brazilian’ interests in the Cortes, that is to say, to maintain political equality with the mother country and the economic freedom secured since 1808. The elections for the Cortes between May and September 1821 were the first general elections ever held in Portuguese America. (Unlike to the Thirteen Colonies in British North America, but like colonial Spanish America, Portuguese America served no significant apprenticeship in representative self-government under Portuguese colonial rule. For three centuries it had been was governed by Crown-appointed governors-general/viceroys and captains-general/governors.)

The extent to which the Portuguese Cortes was intent on putting the clock back and reducing Brazil to its former colonial status, that is to say, recolonising Brazil, has been the subject of much historical debate. For many Brazilians, the decrees of 29 September, ordering the dismantlement of all government institutions established in Rio since the transfer of the Court, and 18 October, ordering the Prince Regent to return home, issued before many of the Brazilian deputies had arrived in Lisbon, were confirmation of Portuguese intransigence and determination to reverse all the changes in relations, including economic relations, between Portugal and Brazil since 1808.

The battle to keep D. João in Brazil had been lost in April 1821. The immediate key to the future autonomy of Brazil was now to persuade his son to stay. There was intense political activity in Rio before D. Pedro finally announced on 9 January 1822 that he would remain in Brazil. The union with Portugal had not yet been broken, but this significant act of disobedience by the Prince Regent amounted to a formal rejection of Portuguese authority over Brazil. José Bonifácio de Andrada e Silva, who had served the Portuguese crown in Lisbon for 35 years before becoming president of the São Paulo provisional junta, was appointed head of a new 'Brazilian' cabinet. The appointment was symbolic of the enormous shift which had now taken place in Brazilian politics. Events were moving inexorably and swiftly towards a final break with Portugal, although the point at which a majority of ‘Brazilian’ leaders could be said to be committed to independence continues to be a subject of debate.

Historians in recent years have given greater attention to those politicians, lawyers, journalists, artisans, etc. in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Salvador, Recife and elsewhere committed to some form of liberal democracy, even a republic, together with the end of slavery and a measure of social and racial equality. There was for the first time in Portuguese America in 1821-2 public opinion, which manifested itself primarily through newspapers and pamphlets. Historians of the movement for independence have also emphasized more than hitherto popular participation, including that of slaves. The liberals and radicals, however, failed to secure direct elections based on universal male suffrage to a proposed Constituent Assembly. The elections in July 1822 were indirect and based on a strictly limited suffrage The political process leading to independence was kept firmly in the hands of politicians like José Bonifácio, who though himself remarkably progressive on social issues – he favoured the gradual abolition of the slave trade, even of slavery, free European immigration and land reform – never had any intention of establishing in Brazil anything that looked remotely like representative democracy based, however theoretically, on the sovereignty of the people. The monarchy was regarded as fundamental for the maintenance of political stability, social order and, it was hoped, territorial unity in the potentially dangerous transition to independence. D. Pedro himself was persuaded to assume the leadership of the movement for independence. More important than his famous declaration of independence on 7 September was his acclamation as Emperor on 12 October and his crowning, with much pomp and ceremony, on 1 December 1822.

The Brazilian movement for independence from Portugal had drawn its strength from the most important provinces of the Centre-South - Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Minas Gerais - and especially from the capital, Rio de Janeiro. Except for Pernambuco and its immediate neighbours, the provinces of the North-east and the North, which were closer to Portugal geographically, which were not economically integrated with the Centre-south and which in many respects historically had closer ties with Lisbon than with Rio de Janeiro, and where there was still a considerable Portuguese military presence, sizeable Portuguese merchant communities and a good deal of pro-Portuguese sentiment, chose to remain loyal to the Cortes in Lisbon. If the process of independence were to be completed and consolidated, a long drawn-out civil war avoided and the authority of the new emperor imposed over the whole of Portuguese America, it was imperative to bring the north-east and north, and especially Bahia, by far the most important of the provinces still under Portuguese control, into line as quickly as possible.

Portugal had neither the financial nor the military resources to offer serious resistance. And in the last resort provincial elites were willing to give their support to the new state with its capital in Rio de Janeiro. They recognized D. Pedro as a symbol of legitimate authority and a powerful instrument of political and social stability. In July 1823 the military loyal to D. Pedro and the navy reorganized by the English mercenary Lord Cochrane, fresh from his triumphs in Chile and Peru, crushed the opposition in Bahia, Maranhão and Pará (Amazonia) and expelled the Portuguese troops loyal to D. João. Such was Brazil's 'War of Independence'.

After many delays, the Constituent Assembly had finally met in May 1823. The future organization of the new Brazilian state was vigorously debated. It was another opportunity for the liberals, 'moderate' and 'extremist', to make their case. But the Assembly was dissolved in November, and not only prominent radicals and liberals but conservative constitutionalists, including José Bonifácio himself, were arrested, imprisoned and driven into exile. D. Pedro promulgated his own constitution in March 1824. Under the political system of the Empire Brazil had an elected Chamber of Deputies – elected, albeit indirectly, by men over 25 who were born free, were Catholic, and had a relatively modest income from property, trade or other employment, not excluding illiterates and non-whites. But the governments of the Empire were only to a limited extent responsible to it. Power was firmly concentrated in the hands of the Emperor and his ministers, the councilors of state and senators he chose (for life) and, not least, the provincial presidents he appointed.

Like resistance to the creation of the United Kingdom in 1817, the most significant opposition to the centralised Empire with its capital in Rio de Janeiro came from Pernambuco. In March 1824 an armed revolt led by a radical priest, Frei Caneca, led to the establishment of an independent republic, the Confederation of the Equator, which was supported by Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba and Ceará and attracted sympathy throughout the northeast, including Bahia. It was liberal and aimed at a federal Brazil on the model of the United States. Evaldo Cabral de Mello argues that to call it 'separatist' assumes, wrongly, the primordial unity of 'Brazil', which never existed and which was being created for the first time and imposed by D. Pedro through his new Constitution. The rebel republic was put down by imperial troops after six months.

The new Brazilian government was anxious to secure international recognition – first, to forestall any further, last ditch attempt (however unlikely) by Portugal, encouraged by the reactionary Holy Alliance powers of Europe, to reassert its authority over Brazil; secondly, and ultimately more important, to strengthen the emperor's authority within Brazil against any remaining loyalist, separatist and republican elements; and thirdly, to be able to secure loans on the London capital market.

The United States was the first to recognize the Brazilian empire (in June 1824). Recognition by Britain was, however, much more important. And here Brazil was fortunate in finding Britain eager to offer early recognition. In the first place, Portugal was seen to be too weak to re-impose its rule; Brazil was *de facto* independent. Secondly, recognition would consolidate Britain's political and economic pre-eminence in Brazil. Thirdly, unlike Spanish America Brazil had retained the monarchy, and George Canning, the British Foreign Secretary was anxious to preserve it as an antidote to the 'evils of universal democracy' on the continent and as a vital link between the Old and New Worlds. Finally, Brazil's need for British recognition presented Britain with a unique opportunity to make significant progress on one of its principal aims: the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade.

British diplomats negotiated the treaty by which Portugal recognized the independence of Brazil in August 1825. D. João could never return to Brazil, but the door was left open for D. Pedro to succeed his father as king of Portugal and thus re-unite Portugal and Brazil once more under the Braganzas.[5] The price for services rendered by Britain – and representing *de facto* British recognition of Brazilian independence - was a commercial treaty which completed the process begun in 1808 whereby Britain transferred its highly privileged economic position from Portugal to Brazil and a treaty under which the entire Brazilian slave trade would become illegal in 1830. (It was not, however, finally suppressed until 1850-1.)

The transition from Portuguese colony to independent Brazilian empire was characterized by an extraordinary degree of political, economic and social continuity. Pedro I and the 'Brazilian' dominant class took over the existing Portuguese state apparatus, which never ceased to function. Despite strong regional identities, and with a Brazilian identity still to be constructed, political fragmentation was avoided. The economy suffered no major dislocation:

[5] As a result, for some historians the separation of Brazil from Portugal was only complete when D. Pedro abdicated in favour of his five-year-old, Brazilian-born son, the future D. Pedro II, in 1831.

the 'colonial' mode of production based on slave labour, Brazil's role in the international division of labour and Brazil's dependence on Britain were largely unaffected. There was no major social upheaval: the popular forces, which were in any case weak, and divided by class, colour and legal status, were successfully contained.

Freedom in the Americas 1776-1826?

Portuguese America/Brazil was freed from Portuguese rule. But within Brazil the institution of slavery survived until 1888. And Brazil did not become a republic until 1889, and a democracy until 1945 or, it could be argued, 1989.

The independence of Brazil 1808 - 1825

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